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An ex-Green Beret's hunt for MILAs

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HE TELLS a fascinating story and he tells it well. As he tells it, the names of crossroads, intersections and provincial capitals of Laos and Vietnam — exotic names that are forbidden spots now to us Americans — spill naturally from his lips.

His story has all the ingredients of a best seller — mystery, intrigue, heroism, international politics, patriotism, cowardice and double-cross.

His reputation was as a gallant warrior in an unpopular war. A Special Forces officer who could always do the job and do it right. A daring wild man who was loved by his troops. A blue-eyed, big-chested, curly-haired Green Beret called "Bo" Gritz who specialized in working behind the lines, very quietly.

HE HAS BEEN out of the Green Berets and military service for three years now. He resigned as a lieutenant colonel suddenly and abruptly after 22 years in the Army. He lives in Los Angeles now and his unemployment checks have run out.

But by the story he tells, those three years have not been empty or idle. In those three years, he was consumed by a mission, a mission he says he was asked to do by the military because the military's hands were tied.

He quit a good career in the military, he says, to carry out this mission and the story he tells is of his unsuccessful attempt at doing it.

It involves the intelligence community, the Pentagon, military officers, politicians, the Department of State, the whims of the presidency and, most of all, the question of whether American men still are being held prisoner in Laos and Vietnam long after they were supposed to come home.

IT IS A QUESTION that has been asked persistently of these secretive government agencies for nine years by the 2,500 families of the missing men. In the beginning, the question elicited firm denials that no one was alive. And then, with reports from fleeing boat people that they'd been seen, the denials changed to "we need more proof," and "maybe" and "if" along with a few grunts, groans and "no comment" — classified, you know.

James "Bo" Gritz, now 43, claims his mission as a civilian was to do what the military was not allowed to do — to find out if Americans were still alive in Southeast Asia and then go in and get them. This is his scenario:

JUNE, 1976 — Gritz has a command position with the Special Forces in Panama. A visiting Army general, now dead, tells him privately of "mounting evidence" that American prisoners are being held in Southeast Asia. Gritz says the general said the military "is handcuffed from doing anything." He said the general told him the Carter administration was "not disposed to pursue the issue" and asked if Gritz would think about how the prisoners could be found.

OCTOBER, 1978 — Gritz, now stationed in Washington, talks to the general again. This time the general asks him "to consider retiring from the military to pursue the POW-MIA issue from the private sector" because the military could do nothing. The general told him there was now "considerable evidence" that men were still alive.

FEBRUARY, 1979 — Gritz meets with Texas industrialist H. Ross Perot and is asked to look into the matter. Gritz says a top official with the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) asked Perot to sponsor the investigation from the private sector.

APRIL AND MAY, 1979 — Gritz goes to Southeast Asia to investigate, he says, sponsored by Perot and Hughes Aircraft, for whom he was then working.

MAY 13, 1979 — Gritz sends a telegram (he has a copy) to Perot saying he is visiting refugee camps and interviewing boat people about American prisoners and has "interesting information." One interviewee is a Vietnamese named Nguyen Dac Giang who said the year before he was held prisoner with 49 Americans in Vietnam. Gritz pushes to have him brought to the U.S. for a polygraph test.

JUNE 7, 1979 — A phone call is made to a top official of the DIA alerting him that there indeed was evidence found that there are live American Prisoners of War.

AUG. 17, 1979 — A letter from then-Secretary of Defense Harold Brown is written to then-Secretary of State Cyrus Vance asking that Gritz' refugee, Giang, be brought to the United States for interrogation and polygraph tests regarding to his claim of being with 9 live American prisoners (Gritz has a copy of this letter).

SEPT. 17, 1979 — A letter is sent to Brown from Vance refusing the request (Gritz also has copy of this letter).

LATE FALL OF '79 — More reports of live American prisoners come in, including one from a Vietnamese colonel, Ngo Van Trieu, who says he saw 25 American prisoners doing hard labor on Oct. 25, Oct. 28 and Nov. 2 of 1978.

EARLY-1980 — Gritz returns to Southeast Asia for more evidence of live American prisoners.

APRIL, 1980 — Laotian General Vang Pao (now living in the United States), former leader of the Laotian Hmong tribesmen during the Vietnam war, gets reports that 30 Americans are being held in central Laos, a region virtually honeycombed with caves.